

# Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization

## How to Record the Oral History of Your Neighborhood

A CONSORTIUM PROJECT OF: Augsburg College; College of St. Catherine; Hamline University; Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs; Macalester College; Metropolitan State University; Minneapolis Community College; Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program; University of Minnesota (Center for Urban and Regional Affairs; Children, Youth and Family Consortium; Minnesota Extension Service); University of St. Thomas; and Minneapolis community and neighborhood representatives.

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**Center for Urban and Regional Affairs  
University of Minnesota  
330 Humphrey Center**

# **How to Record the Oral History of Your Neighborhood**

Conducted on behalf of  
Seward Neighborhood Group

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## C o n t e n t s

1. Focusing in on your neighborhood	3
• Why record oral history?	
• Narrowing the scope of your project	
• Broadening the pool of who you will interview	
• Jargon	
• Doing the background work	
2. Preparation	7
• Choosing appropriate recording tools	
• Preparing and using recording tools	
• Using a timeliqu	
• Using a biographical data sheet	
• Tips on using a questionnaire	
• Creating open-ended questions	
3. Finding narrators	16
• Word of mouth	
• Archival material	
• Immigrants' associations	
4. The interview	18
• Initiating contact	
• Where to conduct the interview	
• How to put the narrator at ease	
• Staying on task	
• The sometimes difficult role of the interviewer	
• Follow-up	
5. Processing and presenting the recorded data	21
• Will you transcribe or summarize?	
• Transcribing	
• Summarizing	
• How to write a summary	
• Saving the final draft for posterity	
• Editing into journal or magazine form	
• Local resources	
6. Legal issues	26
• Release form	
• Restricted release form	
7. Sources and suggested further reading	29



## 1. Focusing in on your neighborhood

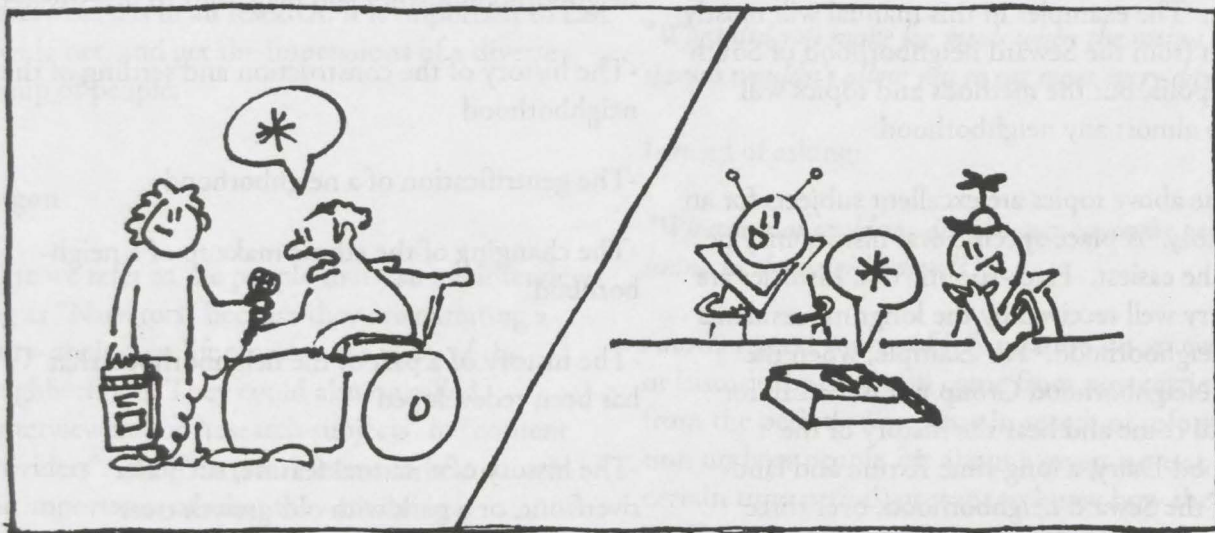
### Why record oral history?

The tradition of passing on information orally is ancient—much older than written language, and goes back much further than written texts. There is a temptation to think that everything has already been recorded in books and can be looked up at the library, and that the job of recording history has already been done by people much smarter than ourselves. However there is still history out there that has not been recorded, and oral histories continue to be relevant, for building commu-

in oral histories. One of the most famous came about when two brothers, hoping to save the disappearing art of the folk tale, assembled the now famous Grimm's Fairy Tales by interviewing illiterate peasant storytellers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany.

Another well-known book made possible by oral history research was Alex Haley's best-selling book and TV miniseries Roots. Haley used hundreds of oral interviews and his own recollections of his grandmother's and great aunt's stories to trace his ancestry back to Africa and found information that changed his life and the way he and millions of other people would look at the world.

Not all oral history has to be done to help create a book or TV series, however. Recording oral history is usually a lot of fun. Hearing the stories about the past, or about another country can be fascinating, and seeing an older person open up, and reveal stories long hidden, or which she



*Oral history preserves knowledge for future generations*

nity as well as recording history, even as we move into an age where it seems like every thing that could have been studied has already been, and the world seems to overflow with information.

Much of what we now know about history and mythology in one way or another has had its roots

thought irrelevant, can be wonderful. Likewise, hearing an immigrant's story of what brought him to this country and what the conditions in his home country were like can be fascinating.

Oral history is about recording history, and also about having fun and building community. The

process of recording oral histories can bring neighbors together in a common bond, and be a means by which people can meet other neighborhood residents who they otherwise would not have had contact with. Remember to enjoy the process, while still respecting the rights of the narrators and striving to be as accurate as you can possibly be.

### Narrowing the scope of the project.

So you may be interested in helping to record the oral history of your neighborhood. But what does that mean? It's clear enough what an oral history is, but there are so many histories to be told, that it's helpful to narrow down the scope of your research before it starts. Do you want to write about a specific building or school and the effect that it had on the neighborhood? Do you want to follow the immigration of an ethnic group to the neighborhood? Do you want to chart the effect that a war or another significant historical event had on the neighborhood? Maybe you would like to record the impressions that neighborhood residents had of a famous person who grew up in the area. The examples in this manual will mostly be taken from the Seward neighborhood of South Minneapolis, but the methods and topics will apply to almost any neighborhood.

All of the above topics are excellent subjects for an oral history. A place-specific oral history may be one of the easiest. Place-specific oral histories are often very well received by the longtime residents of the neighborhood. For example, when the Seward Neighborhood Group put out a call for people to come and hear the history of the Birchwood Dairy, a long-time fixture and landmark of the Seward neighborhood, over three dozen participants showed up. When the scheduled speaker wasn't able to come, the group almost spontaneously began recalling their memories of the dairy, which were recorded and then sent to the former Birchwood owners- who greatly appreciated hearing how much their business had meant to the people of the neighborhood.

Another interesting thing to trace is the history of

a group that has immigrated to the neighborhood. What conditions brought so many Swedes to the Seward neighborhood around the turn of the century? How many are left in the neighborhood now? What brought them here in the first place? What brings Somali immigrants to the neighborhood today? What happened that caused them to leave Somalia? What brought them to a place where the climate is so different from their homeland?

Maybe you want to take a different tack and document the way the residents dealt with a divisive event such as the Vietnam War. You could interview American veterans of the war, as well as Vietnamese-Americans, who fled the country after the war, and protestors who opposed the war as well as persons who supported the war and compare the way that each of these groups viewed the conflict.

These are just a few examples of ways in which to make your oral history research more focused. Here are a few suggestions of some aspects of neighborhood history you may want to investigate:

- The history of the construction and settling of the neighborhood
- The gentrification of a neighborhood
- The changing of the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood
- The history of a part of the neighborhood that has been redeveloped
- The history of a natural feature, such as a riverfront, or a park with old-growth trees
- The history of union organizing and strikes in the neighborhood
- A women's history of the neighborhood
- Memoirs of neighborhood schools or businesses
- The history of a large employer in the neighborhood.

## Broadening the pool of who you will interview

Obviously, for some of these topics, senior citizens will be the best people to interview in order to find out information on the time periods or topics you wish to cover. They often are excellent interview subjects and happy to talk about their memories of the neighborhood and everything else. However, don't be tempted to talk only to the elderly population.

Younger people can contribute a great deal to oral histories as well, especially in case where there may not be many older people in a group that has recently immigrated to the United States. For a project such as the history of the immigration to the neighborhood, or of racism in the neighborhood, you will want to talk to people of all ethnic groups and ages, and not limit your interviews to people over the age of 65. The impressions of the young are likely to be different from the impression of the older generation, and you will find a broader range of opinions than you would have otherwise. As in all research, it is important to cast a wide net, and get the impressions of a diverse group of people.

## Jargon

Here we refer to the people that you are interviewing as "Narrators" because they are narrating a story— their own life story or the story of the neighborhood. They could also be called "interviewees" or "research subjects" or "content providers". But "narrator" seems to best convey the importance of what they are doing.

Likewise, you are the "interviewer". You are interviewing people, as a journalist would, to find out more about them and about their history and the history of the place in which they have grown up. As an interviewer, you have the responsibility to be fair to the narrators, and to accurately represent what the narrator says, without changing it to make anyone either look good or look bad.

## Doing the background work

If you don't already have a firm grasp on the history of the period about which you are interviewing— go back to the history book— look up the subject you intend to interview about in an encyclopedia. It may be biased, it may not offer a full view of history, but that is part of what you plan to find out when doing oral histories—what is the account given by someone who really was there? You will be much better off if you can use the jargon of the time, and cite specific events, rather than acting confused and asking only vague questions about an incident or a time period.

For example, if you are interviewing someone about how neighborhood residents dealt with World War II, you may want to find out the names of the major battles of the war, and what sort of shortages people had to deal with at home.

That way, you can ask a focused question like:

*"What did you make for meals when the ration stamps wouldn't allow you to eat meat every day?"*

Instead of asking:

*"What sort of problems did the war cause for people living in the neighborhood?"*

Another good source of information on an event or historical period will come from news articles from the period. If you are in search of information on how people felt about a given issue at a certain time period, or want to know how the media reported an event, go to the downtown library and check the microfilm collection. You will find newspaper articles from several different Minneapolis newspapers (the Journal, the Star, the Tribune, the Star-Tribune) and the New York Times dating back to the mid-1800's. You may find that the articles from the day will give you a much different perspective than will a modern history book, and help convey the urgency of the situation, or the panic felt by most people at the

time. They are often fascinating to read, and you could find yourself poring over a 100-year old newspaper for hours in the back of the public library.

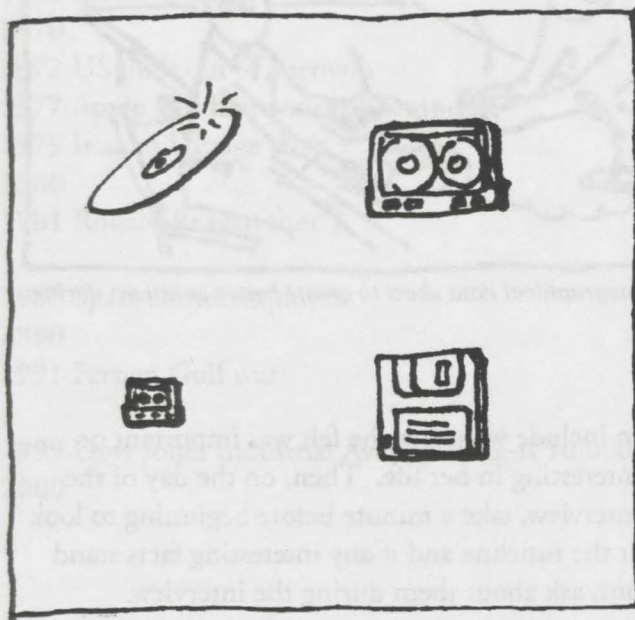


## 2. Preparation

### Choosing appropriate recording tools

If you are recording oral histories as a part of a neighborhood oral history program, or for the local historical society, you will probably end up using whatever tools they have available. However, if you are doing this on your own, or if the organization has more than one type of recording device available, you may want to take the following advice into consideration.

The best tools to use for recording oral histories change from time to time. In the early 1900's, oral historians would write frantically in shorthand to record what the narrator was saying. Later, in the 1960's and 70's oral historians found their job a lot easier as reel-to-reel recorders became portable and inexpensive enough for most local historical societies to purchase. In the 1980s, tape recorders became more common and less expensive, and ultra-compact microcassette recorders became available.



CDs, tapes, microcassettes, and computer disks are all useful media for storing oral history data

Now, we have access to even more recording devices. What will you use to record your oral history? Will you videotape it? Record it on a CD? Put it directly on a computer disk?

*When deciding what medium to use to record your oral histories, keep the following things in mind:*

1. Is the sound quality good?
2. Is it simple to operate? (Will the interviewer be able to operate it and not have it distract from the interview?)
3. Can it be easily preserved and used by future generations?

So, using these criteria, how does a microcassette recorder, for example, fare? 1. Sound quality—The sound quality is not so good if the built-in microphone is used, but quite good if there is a remote microphone that can be clipped to the narrator's lapel, or set on the table. 2. Simple to operate? It is simple to operate—most people have used a tape player, and the buttons are the same, but very small. It would be hard for someone with large clumsy fingers to operate. 3. Easily preserved and used? Preservation—well, that is a problem with microcassettes. Magnetic tape will last 10 years—past that is anyone's guess. Also, most people do not have microcassette players in their homes, therefore it is useless outside of most libraries.

Using these same criteria, how good would a videotape be? 1. Sound quality—The sound quality is terrible on most video recorders, unless a special external microphone is used. 2. Simple to operate? It takes some knowledge of the equipment to operate, but most people can understand how to use it within a few minutes. It will probably require a separate cameraperson during the interview, however and that may distract the narrator from the interview. 3. Easily preserved and read? It can be easily read—most people have VCRs in their home, and can view it in their own living room. And, better than any audiotape, they



provide a visual record as well as an audio record. But, like audiotapes, it is uncertain how long a videotape will last. Ten years is the longest they can be reasonably be expected to be preserved without the sound and picture quality degrading.

Technology changes quickly, and you should decide what best to use based on these 3 criteria, and how much you or your historical society or neighborhood group can afford. Because no technology is foolproof, be sure to also keep brief written notes during the interview, to fill in spots that may be missed by the recording device, or to have a record of any parts that may be accidentally erased. In many cases, the best option is to use the best technology available, and have the recordings re-recorded at regular intervals (such as every 10 years) to guard against the deterioration of the medium.

### Preparing and using recording tools

Practice with your recording devices **before** the interview. Have some fun with them. Practice recording on them at different settings and with a variety of noises in the background. Find out what works best. Find the limitations of the device you are working with.

Whatever you do— don't try learning how to use the recording device in front of the narrator at the interview. Know how to work everything before going to meet the narrator. The narrator will be nervous enough as it is. You don't need to add a level of tension by showing that you do not know how to work this expensive and possibly very intimidating piece of equipment.

The narrator may not be familiar with the technology you are using and be intimidated by it. If this seems to be the case, you may want to take a

minute to show the narrator what you are doing and how it works. Or you may choose to simply set the machine up as quietly and unobtrusively as possible and hope that it does not draw too much attention during the interview.

### Using a timeline

Take a look at the sample timeline on the next page. You can use it as is, or you could create your own timeline that is more detailed, tailored for your neighborhood, or tailored toward the research you plan to do. For a more specialized topic, you want to create a more specialized timeline. But as a generic starting point, the following timeline will be useful.

Before the interview, either personally deliver or mail the timeline to the narrator and ask the narrator to list her major life events (birth, marriage, birth of children, employment dates, death of loved ones) on the right side of the line. Tell her



*Use the timeline and biographical data sheet to create better questions during the interview*

to include whatever she felt was important or interesting in her life. Then, on the day of the interview, take a minute before beginning to look at the timeline and if any interesting facts stand out, ask about them during the interview.

1900

1903 Wright Brothers first flight

Personal history (birth, marriage,  
other important dates)

1908 First Model T sold

1910

1914 World War I breaks out

1918 WWI ends

1920 Beginning of Prohibition

1929 Stock market crash Great Depression begins

1930

1932 FD Roosevelt initiates "New Deal"

1939 WWII begins

1940

1941 US enters WWII

1945 WWII ends

1950 Korean War begins

1953 Korean War cease-fire

1955 First Elvis record released

1957 Soviets launch first human into space,

1960

1963 JF Kennedy assassinated

1968 Dr. ML King & Robert Kennedy assassinated

1969 moon landing

1970

1972 US pulls out of Vietnam

1977 Apple sells first personal computer

1979 Iranian hostage crisis

1980

1981 Ronald Reagan shot

1987 Space shuttle explodes

1990

1991 Persian Gulf war

1999 Dow Jones Industrial Average exceeds 10,000

2000

The timeline is not absolutely essential, but it is a helpful tool, to bring more information out of the narrator than would normally be possible. Giving them a list of historical events and asking them to plot out the big events of their life on the same timeline can jog a lot of memories that may not have been brought up otherwise. It can also help tie some of the narrator's life events to world events and bring about a dialogue that is more relevant to events with which younger readers can identify. For example, if you are studying a specific issue, such as the fight for civil rights in the 1950's and 60's, you may want to include in the timeline the assassination of Malcolm X, as well as the Montgomery bus boycott and formation of the Black Panthers.

### Creating a biographical data sheet

The biographical data sheet on the next page is another helpful tool which you can use to elicit more information about the narrator's family and family origins. If you are doing a project about immigration, or about a specific ethnic group, this will help you to quickly find out some of the essential things that you will want to know.

If you choose to use the biographical data sheet, deliver it (along with the timeline, if you are using that as well) to the narrator at least one day before the interview, and ask her to fill it out to the best of her ability. When you meet for the interview, look over the biographical data sheet before beginning in order to be able to focus your questions better. For example, if you see that the narrator's parents came from Russia in 1917, you may want to ask if they were fleeing the Bolsheviks, fleeing religious pogroms, or if they wanted to avoid being drafted to fight in World War I.

**Biographical Data Sheet**

Completed by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ M F

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital status: \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of marriage: \_\_\_\_\_

Children and dates of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's maiden name: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Immigration: \_\_\_\_\_

Father's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Immigration: \_\_\_\_\_

Maternal Grandparents: \_\_\_\_\_

Paternal Grandparents: \_\_\_\_\_

Names and ages of brothers and sisters: \_\_\_\_\_

Languages spoken: \_\_\_\_\_

Places lived and when: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: Elementary school \_\_\_\_\_ Middle school \_\_\_\_\_

High School \_\_\_\_\_ College/other \_\_\_\_\_

Work experience and dates: \_\_\_\_\_

Hobbies: \_\_\_\_\_

Religion: \_\_\_\_\_

Organizations, member of (past and present): \_\_\_\_\_

Date of immigration to US: \_\_\_\_\_ Departure point: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of arrival in Minnesota: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample questionnaire

The following questionnaire gives examples of questions that you could ask during the interview. For your interview, you want to customize the questions to fit the information you want to ask your narrator, but feel free to use questions from this list, taken from the Minnesota Historical Society's Oral History Project Guidelines. For more questionnaire tips, see The Handbook of Oral History: Recording Life Stories by Stephen Humphries, which is listed in the bibliography.

What did you call your neighborhood?  
What were its boundaries?  
Did neighbors have get-togethers?  
Was there a neighborhood association?  
Where did you get news for what was happening in your neighborhood?  
Was there a neighborhood newspaper?  
From whom or where were you likely to hear the neighborhood news?

Where were you living in the late 1930's and 1940's?  
What was the racial /ethnic/economic makeup of the neighborhood?  
How long did you live there?  
What prompted you to move?  
Do you recall if and when your neighbors moved?  
Was it the custom to take in boarders in these large homes?  
Do you recall any homes being divided into two or more units?  
Did you ever consider doing that to your house?  
Did you leave your doors unlocked?  
Were you ever robbed?  
Did you walk in the neighborhood after dark?  
Was there a neighborhood cop?  
Where was the fire station?  
Do you recall any major fires?  
What did you do when someone was ill or injured?  
What hospital or doctor's office did you go to ?  
How did you get there?

What services did the city provide?  
What happened when there was a big snowstorm?  
Did schools and businesses close?  
How soon were the streets plowed?  
Were the city parks and playgrounds plowed?  
Were they supervised?  
Did you know the mailman?  
How often was the mail delivered?  
Was anything else delivered to your house regularly? (milk, ice)  
What were the salesmen who visited your house selling?  
Where was the public library?



What grocery store did you patronize?  
What Drugstore? Hardware store? Barber shop? Beauty shop? Clothing store?  
Did the proprietors live in the neighborhood?  
Who repaired things when they were broken?  
Was there a neighborhood handyman?  
Who did the yard work?

Did you have a car? If so, what kind was it?  
Who drove it?  
Where did you park it?  
Who repaired it?  
Where was the gas station?  
How much did a gallon of gasoline cost?  
Where did you go when you went out for a drive?  
How did you get to work?  
Where did you go to see a movie or play or concert?  
Was there a neighborhood music or theater group?  
Who were the favorite local performers?  
What did a ticket cost?  
Where were the favorite spots to gather?  
Was there a neighborhood bar or restaurant?  
Was it a place for gossip or political discussion?  
Was it a trouble spot?  
What did you do on a Saturday night?  
On a Sunday Afternoon?  
What were the most popular sports?  
Where did you play golf or softball, or \_\_\_\_\_, or swim?  
What happened in the neighborhood on Memorial Day, Fourth of July or Labor Day?

Where did you attend church (or synagogue, mosque, temple)?  
Was your church an important influence on the neighborhood?  
Did everyone know the minister?  
What kinds of church social functions were there?  
Were there social groups for young people?  
What churches did your neighbors attend?

What newspapers did you read?  
Did you rely on the radio for national news?  
What was the first news event you remember hearing on the radio?  
What was the best source of news during World War II?  
What were your favorite radio programs?  
When did you get a television set?  
What was the first news event you remember seeing on television?

Where did the children go to school?  
How did they get there?  
Where did their classmates live?

What was the racial/ethnic/economic mix of the school?  
 Were there discipline problems in the school? How were they handled?  
 What did children do after school?  
 Where did they go?  
 Who cared for them?  
 Was there a playground or a park?  
 Did neighborhood children play together?  
 What were your favorite games?  
 How were very young children cared for?  
 Who were the babysitters?  
 Did children take music or dancing lessons in the neighborhood? Who was the teacher?  
 How did children in the neighborhood earn spending money?  
 What did children spend it on?  
 What store or shopkeeper was the children's favorite? Why?  
 Do you remember anything that really caught on as a fad in the late 1930's and 40's?

From reading this questionnaire, you can see that it was designed to draw out information from a middle-class senior citizen about the neighborhood and how it has changed since the 1930's. If this is the type of interview you are going to conduct, this questionnaire will work out well for you.

However let's assume that you are about to interview a Somali man who immigrated to the United States in 1997. Most of the questions in the sample interview would not apply. What would he say when you ask him how the neighborhood has changed since the 1930's. He'd probably think you were a bit strange.

Instead, create some questions like the following:

How long have you lived in the United States?  
 Where did you first enter?  
 How did the immigration officers treat you?

What were your first impressions of the US?  
 Did they conflict with what you thought the US would be like?  
 What sort of American TV shows or movies had you seen in Somalia?

What was your occupation in Somalia?  
 Where did you live?  
 Did you leave relatives behind?  
 What events made you decide to leave Somalia?  
 How do you feel now about your decision to leave?  
 Do you want to go back someday?  
 What cultural differences have been most difficult to deal with?  
 What cultural differences have you been most surprised about?

Why did you choose to live in Minnesota?  
 What had you heard about Minnesota before coming here?  
 How did you prepare for your first winter?  
 What surprised you most about Minnesota?

Have you ever been discriminated against in Minnesota?

### Creating open-ended questions:

As an interviewer, your questions should always lead to several possible answers, and not lead the narrator to one particular response or to just "yes" or "no". Phrase a question in such a way as to be able to be answered with a wide variety of replies. The sample interview questions at the beginning of the chapter are almost all written as open-ended questions.

Here a few examples of closed-ended and open-ended questions:

#### Closed

"I have heard that Mayor Nelson was a real jerk. What do you think?"  
*(would bias the narrator to be negative.)*

#### Open

"What did you think about Mayor Nelson?"  
*(does not show any interviewer bias)*

#### Closed

"Did you go to the church near your house?"  
*(only requires a yes or no answer)*

#### Open

"Describe what you did on Sunday mornings."  
*(requires a more involved answer)*

#### Closed

"How much money did you make at your job?"  
*(only requires a specific number.)*

#### Open

"Did your job pay any less after the start of the Great Depression?"  
*(This is a more appropriate question if you wanted to know more about a specific field and changes in working conditions and pay.)*

### Tips on using a questionnaire

If you have some controversial or difficult questions in your questionnaire, save them for the very end of the interview. Questions dealing with race, religion or sexuality may be uncomfortable for the narrator and may cause him/her to stop the interview or become unwilling to honestly answer questions. It is better to wait for the end of the interview, when the narrator is feeling more relaxed, and after the narrator has already answered the more non-controversial questions.

You may find that some narrators may give very short answers to your questions. If your narrator has very little to say, you could find yourself at the end of the questionnaire with plenty of time and tape left to spare. This is why you ought to have twice as many questions as you feel like you could ask during the interview. It is far better to load the end of the questionnaire with silly questions, than to run out of things to talk about. The more absurd questions may also help to bring a narrator out of her shell, if she has just been quiet because of a shy disposition or a lack of confidence.

If you have the opposite problem, and the narrator talks for a half-hour about each question that you ask, then feel free to skip around, and ask only the questions you most want answers for. Don't feel like you have to stick to the questionnaire. By being spontaneous, you may uncover some interesting information that you were not prepared for. Feel free to ask questions about the subject that occur to you while you listen. But don't cut off the narrator just to make sure that you get all of your questions answered. You will find much more interesting information by just letting them continue.

1800's.

For Seward neighborhood-related articles, it is possible to find Seward Profile articles only as far back as 1970. They can be found at the Triangle Park office, the current publisher of the Seward Profile, in the Downtown Library's special collections department, at the Seward Neighborhood Group office, and at the Minnesota Historical Society library.

### 3. Finding narrators

#### Archival material

You may already know people who you would like to interview, and find that they can refer you to another person, and another and another and so on. You may not need to do any research at all. If so, skip to the next section.

If you do need to search out narrators, one good way to find them would be to look up newspaper articles, find people who were involved in the event(s) or who were interviewed about the event(s), look them up in the phone book, and interview them now about the same subject.

If you're serious about doing newspaper research, go to the downtown library and ask a librarian to show you how to use the microfilm. This involves using a big machine which may seem formidable, but which is actually easy to use once you get the hang of it. As mentioned in chapter 2, the downtown library has the major Minneapolis newspapers and the New York Times on microfilm, going back to the mid-

Specialty libraries, such as those at the Hennepin County History Museum, the Minnesota Historical Society, the American Swedish Institute can be good sources of information depending on what you are looking for. Local historical societies, neighborhood groups, or specialty libraries may hold a treasure trove of information that few people are aware of or use very often. The best way to find such places now, would be by searching online if you have access to a computer. Many



*One interview done well will encourage your narrator to tell other potential narrators about your project. Word of mouth is the best way to find narrators.*

museums and small libraries will have websites, or at least a mention on a larger organization's website, which can lead you to their physical location.

### **Word of mouth**

Once you find one person willing to be interviewed, they are likely to know many more people of their generation who would be willing to talk about the same subject. Ask them if they know anyone else who would be willing to talk to you and if you've done a good job, you will very likely be showered with names of people.

An article in a local paper can also generate responses, and start the word-of mouth chain in action. Even if the people you are seeking do not normally read the newspaper, you may find that one person who has read an article on the project will begin talking about it with friends.

### **Ethnic institutions and religious organizations**

If your plan is to find out more about the patterns of immigration in a neighborhood, then find out where immigrants from various countries in your neighborhood congregate. It may be a social center, or a religious organization, or a nursing

home. Be willing to go to that place and search out people who seem like they would be willing to do an oral history interview.

## 4. The interview

### Initiating contact

When you know who you plan to interview, and are confident in your interviewing skills, you can go ahead and make contact with that person, if you haven't already. You could make a phone call, or a personal visit, or send a letter (see sample introduction letter) to the narrator to introduce yourself and explain what you plan to do.

Arrange to send the materials, such as the legal release, the timeline and the biographical data sheet with the letter, or deliver them in person before the interview. Be sure to give the narrator enough time to look at and fill out the materials before the actual interview. You ought to give the narrator at least 2 days notice before the interview, and preferably more than that- such as a week, in order to be most effective.

### Sample introduction letter:

Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_,

I am working with the Seward Neighborhood Group Project to record the oral history of this neighborhood. I have been told that you have a good understanding of the history of Seward, and would appreciate the opportunity to interview you.

If you consent to be interviewed, we would sit and talk for anywhere from a half-hour to two hours about Seward neighborhood history. The interview will be informal, and you will have the opportunity to talk about any historical topic that you feel comfortable discussing. We are trying to document the lives of normal people in Seward, so feel free to talk about anything regarding your early years in the neighborhood, and your impressions of how Seward has changed over the years.

Enclosed, you will find a timeline and biographical data sheet. If you agree to be interviewed, please fill these out as best you can to help us do a more thorough interview.

I will call you later in the week to find out if you are willing to be interviewed. Thank you for your time, and I hope that we can work together to create a better historical record for the neighborhood.

Sincerely,



### Where and how to conduct the interview

The best place to conduct an interview is in a place where the narrator is comfortable, can speak freely, and where there are few interruptions.

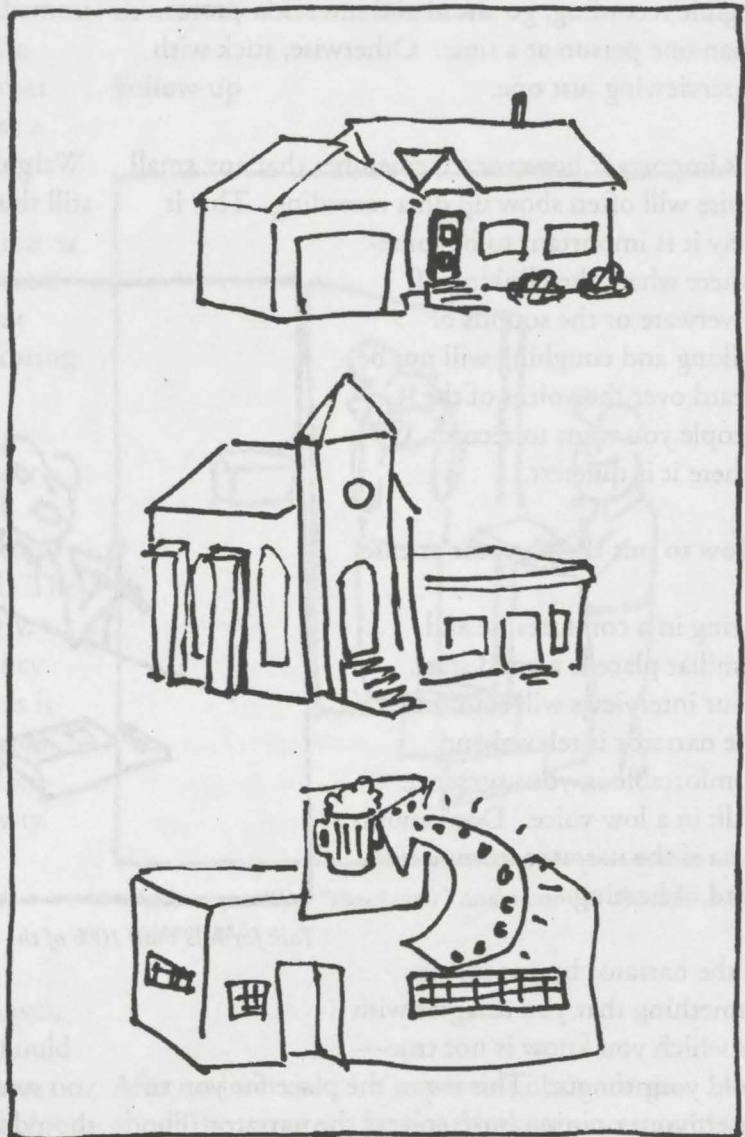
The best place then, if the narrator will allow it, is in the narrator's home, when nobody else is around.

Schedule a time with the narrator when the spouse will be out or will be occupied with another matter. Have the narrator put the dog (or any other noisy pet) in another room. Have the narrator sit in her favorite chair, and in the room where the most activity in the house takes place, not the formal room with linen doilies. Convince the narrator that you do not mind sitting in a messy room, or on the old furniture. The narrator will be more open if they are in surroundings where they are used to relaxing, and you probably will be too.

If the spouse is home, politely ask that he/she wait in the other room and answer the phone and doorbell during the interview. This not only ensures that there will not be the interruption of answering the phone or the door, but also keeps the spouse out of the room, and prevents disagreements over whether some event happened one way or another, or who did what. It also removes the hesitation that the narrator may feel about talking about sensitive subjects in front of other people.

If the narrator's home can't be used for the interview, choose another place that is relatively quiet, and where the narrator would be comfortable and in familiar surroundings. If there is a bar or coffee

shop that the narrator likes, meet there during a quiet time of day (mid-morning or mid-afternoon). A union hall or church annex may also be appropriate places if the narrator is comfortable there and there will not be too many other people around.



*Interview the narrator in a place which is comfortable for her and quiet. Her home, a church annex or a quiet bar or library would work well.*

Professor Jean Allman of the University of Minnesota, disagrees that the best way to interview a subject is when they are alone, however. She has found in her research that more details will come out if there is a group of people that recounts an



event or talks about a person. Whether you interview an individual or a group depends on what you want to accomplish- either a single person's account of an event in an easily understandable manner, or a group interview with many different perspectives. If you are very confident in your interviewing skills and your ability to be able to work with a group of people and produce a legible recording, go ahead and interview more than one person at a time. Otherwise, stick with interviewing just one.

It's important however to remember that any small noise will often show up on a recording. This is why it is important to be somewhere where the clinking of silverware or the sounds of talking and coughing will not be heard over the voices of the people you want to record. Go where it is quietest.

#### How to put the narrator at ease

Being in a comfortable and familiar place is a good start. Your interviews will sound best if the narrator is relaxed and comfortable in your presence. Talk in a low voice. Don't shout- even if the narrator seems a bit hard of hearing.

If the narrator begins saying something that you disagree with or which you know is not true—hold your tongue! This is not the place for you to insert your opinion or to correct the narrator. The most you should do, is to phrase the next question in a way that keeps your stance neutral, but which introduces an idea into the conversation, such as:

*"Some people would say that Richard Nixon was not such a good president. What would you say to them?"*

What the narrator says does not have to fit in with the version of history that is commonly accepted.

It could even be patently false. What you are doing is recording the narrator's story, and the story that comes out is going to be part fact, part opinion. Be ready to not say anything when the narrator says something you do not agree with.

If there is a long pause, or an awkward silence during the interview, don't feel that you have to immediately ask another question to fill the void.

Wait a moment. Watch and see if the narrator is still thinking, or pondering whether or not to tell



*Talk for less than 10% of the time and listen for 90%*

you some information that they are not sure they should share. If you wait, you may find out that they are willing to say something that would not otherwise have come out.

#### Staying on task

While it is true that you shouldn't cut off a narrator in order to get all of your questions answered, if the narrator starts to spend a half-hour talking about a gallbladder operation, or about a new



grandchild, gently redirect the conversation back to the questionnaire. Don't be rude about it- but say something like:

*"I'm glad to hear that your grandson is walking now, Mrs. Petersen. If you don't mind my changing the subject- where did your daughter- his mother- go to elementary school?"*

Often narrators will be happy to talk about the past again when redirected. The simple fact that someone is willing to listen to them may cause a lonely person to begin talking about everything under the sun. While the narrator may believe that your interest in her grandchildren is as great as hers is, you must gently work to keep the narrator on the subject you came to talk about, without showing that you are not very interested in hearing about a toddler's new accomplishments.

#### The sometimes difficult role of the interviewer

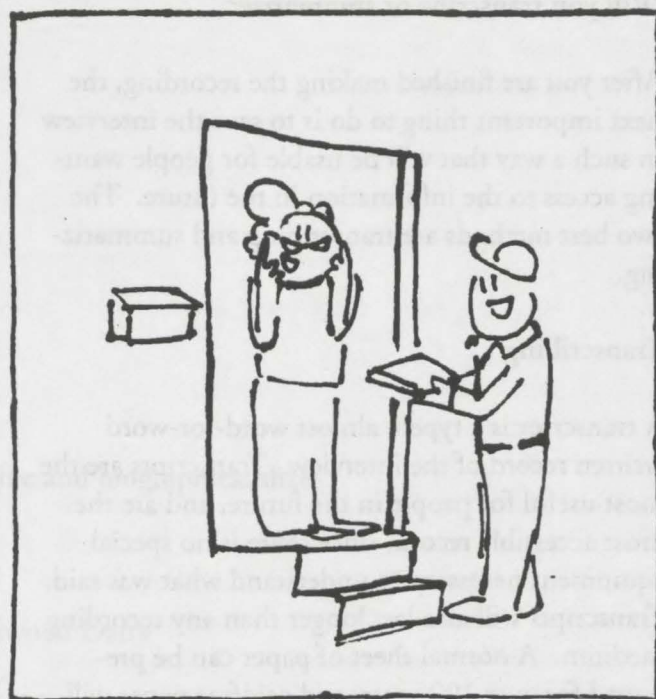
Sometimes, the events that the narrator recounts may be quite tragic, and emotionally charged. The narrator may start crying or become very angry. Remember that you are not the person that they are sad about or angry at. Be as sympathetic as is possible without making yourself or the narrator uncomfortable. You are not a disinterested scientist or journalist who has to maintain objectivity. Your question may have brought up a long-forgotten painful memory, and you should be ready to deal with the response.

You should also remember that as the interviewer, you are not the star of the show. The focus should be on the narrator. This is not the time to show off your wit or the big words you know. Rather, focus on asking questions that the narrator can understand, and getting responses from them.

In addition, do not say "oh yes, mm-hmm, yep" throughout the interview in order to show that you are listening. Instead, nod and try to make non-verbal gestures such as head nodding (that will not be recorded on the tape) to show that you hear and understand what the narrator is saying.

You will notice that some of the best interviewers on TV and radio are not flashy people, and tend to not drop lots of big words. They are people who ask important questions, are persistent, then take the time to listen carefully to what an interviewee says, then follow up on that information. As the journalistic credo says: Good interviewers don't shine; only their interviews do.

#### Follow-up



*Follow up with a "thank-you" and a copy of the tape and/or transcript*

After an interview, it's important not to forget about the narrator. Send a thank-you note and be sure to mention how important the information she gave you will be to the neighborhood history project.

You also ought to give the narrator a copy of the finished recording, and transcript if there was one made. This can be a precious memento for not only the narrator but also for her family after she is gone. It also helps show the narrator the impor-

tance of what she has done, and makes her feel better about the process.

## 5. Processing and presenting the recorded data

### Will you transcribe or summarize?

After you are finished making the recording, the next important thing to do is to save the interview in such a way that will be usable for people wanting access to the information in the future. The two best methods are transcribing and summarizing.

### Transcribing

A transcript is a typed, almost word-for-word written record of the interview. Transcripts are the most useful for people in the future, and are the most accessible record, since there is no special equipment necessary to understand what was said. Transcripts will also last longer than any recording medium. A normal sheet of paper can be preserved for over 100 years, and acidfree paper will last indefinitely. Transcripts can also be transferred (copied, faxed, and emailed) with an ease that is impossible with any sound recording. Therefore, making a transcript is desirable if the interview is to be accessible to a lot of people or saved for a long time.

However, the downside of transcribing is that it takes a long time and a lot of effort. One estimate is that it takes 6 to 8 hours on average to transcribe one hour of an interview. If you have the time and energy to transcribe, please see the Minnesota Historical Society's Transcribing, Editing and Processing Guidelines. They are available from the Historical Society for free or for a small fee. They will give you all of the information you will

need to know about how to transcribe and the ethical guidelines for those transcribing interviews. If you are a fast typist, and have access to a transcription machine, then you can feel comfortable transcribing the interview. Otherwise you may want to stick to summarizing.

### Summarizing

Summarizing the recording is much easier. Summaries still provide a written guide to what was said on the recording, but only a page, as compared to dozens of pages, in a transcript. A summary will tell any researcher the basics of what was said, so that they can find the tape and listen to the desired information.

The downside of this method, of course, is that the future researcher must have the proper equipment to listen to the tape. If the technology to listen to the tape is no longer available, then the tape is all but worthless. What is worse- the tape could be lost or ruined, and the information will be lost forever.

### How to write a summary

If you choose to summarize, as I am sure many will, the following suggestions apply:

If you have kept written notes of the interview, summarizing will be easy. List the topics covered in the interview, then listen to the tape and note when those topics began being talked about. If you did not take notes, stop the tape from time to time to write down what you thought the topic being addressed was. Keep it short. The summary should be about one page long.

If you have a tape recorder that has a counter, use the counter numbers to indicate where each subject begins. If your recorder does not have a counter, then use the number of minutes into the tape to indicate where the subject is.

If you are confused about where the transition was between topics, or whether a topic was a new one,

or a continuation of an old one, give it the benefit of the doubt, and list it as a new topic. See the next page for a sample summary.

*Sample summary:*

**Narrator:** Ms. Helga Petersen

**Address:** 2020 S. 29<sup>th</sup> Av.

**Biographical information:** born in 1920, she has lived in or near the Seward neighborhood since she was 5 years old. Parents emigrated from Denmark in 1912.

**Date of interview:** November 16, 2000

**Interviewer:** Jeff Zeitler

**Location:** Ms. Petersen's house.

**Length of cassette:** 60 minutes

**Length of interview:** 60 minutes

**Summary:**

0-3 min introductions, pleasantries, talk about timeline and biographical sheet

3-5 min Discuss Mrs. Peterson's work history

5-6 min Discuss working conditions in the old Birchwood Dairy

6-14 min Mrs. Petersen's role as a factory worker in a GI rations manufacturing plant during World War II

14-17 min Talk about the death of Mrs. Petersen's husband

17-30 min Discuss the ways in which wives and girlfriends kept in touch with soldiers during World War II

30-31 min Talk about Mrs. Petersen's newest grandchild

31-48 min Talk about Mrs. Petersen's childhood in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, and how it has changed for children living there now

48-52 min Discuss the way that South Minneapolis has changed during her lifetime

52-58 min Talk about the closing of the restaurant her family used to eat at on Saturdays when she was young



58-60 min Closing pleasantries, chat about the weather.

### Saving the final draft for posterity

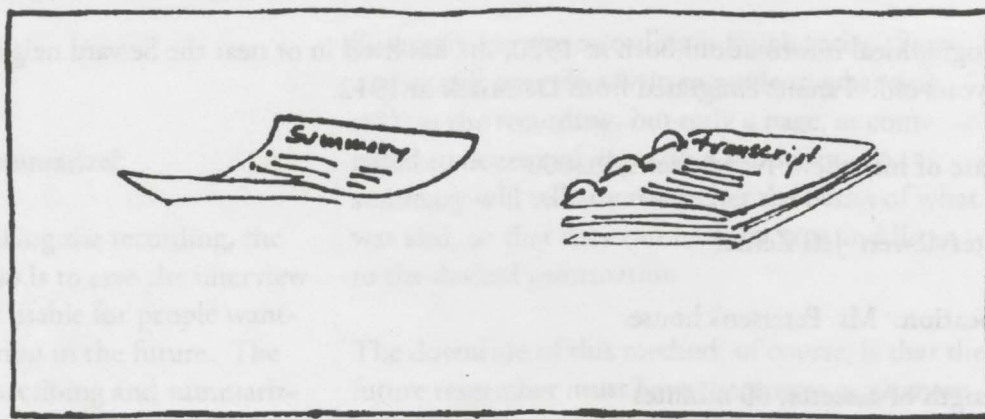
Hopefully, you already know what you will be doing with the finished product before you even begin interviewing. If you have already finished an oral history and would like to archive it, contact your local neighborhood group, or the local historical society or library. If they are willing to store it, bring the original tape and the release form as well.

Make sure first that the historical society or library is able to make the interview available to the public, and will not simply keep it in a box in the basement. Find out if they have the space and are willing to store your research and put it in circulation. Keep a copy of the tape and of the summary if you like. Don't forget to send a copy to the narrator as well. If you have done a good job, your research will be used by future scholars and researchers to get a more complete picture of neighborhood life in the past.

### Editing into journal or magazine form

Some communities have begun oral history programs in which local high school students go out into the community and record the histories of neighborhood people, then put the resulting interviews into magazine form. Foxfire, in rural northern Georgia, and Loblolly in eastern Texas are two of the best known examples. These magazines have become known nationwide, with Foxfire even being made into a television series.

This is not to say that every neighborhood has the sort of material that would convince a producer to create a TV special about it, but it does show that most people really are interested in the stories of the past and the wisdom of their elders. If there is enough interest and a source of funding, oral histories can be compiled into a magazine, journal,



*A summary is short and sweet, while a transcript is longer and very thorough*

radio program or public access cable program.

Other communities have found that high schools are untapped sources of energy and talent, which when directed to create oral history records, will create something that many residents are excited about, and which create a lasting record of the history of the neighborhood. Other local organizations could do the same sort of project. A senior citizens group could organize a project, perhaps with a little technical or equipment help from junior high school students. A religious organization's youth group could work on such a project, or a neighborhood group could videotape "nostalgia evenings" where local senior citizens recall the neighborhood's history, and air it on public-access cable TV.

There are more than a few ways to use finished oral histories. What is important is that the information is not lost, and that interested people



have access to it. Also important is that the process helps to bring community members close and builds new connections between community members.

KMOJ 89.9 ( North Minneapolis African-American radio) 612-374-5615  
KBEM 88.5 (Dept. of Transportation station- airs school news) 612-668-1735

*For public-access cable TV:*

### Local Resources

Here are a few Minneapolis area media outlets that



may be willing to collaborate with an oral history program to produce or air an oral history production. The numbers are current for 2001, but might be out of date by the time you read this

### *For printing and publishing:*

Triangle Park Creative— 612-692-8560

Autographics— 612-331-7200

Kinko's— various locations, see yellow pages for closest one

### *For local radio:*

KFAI 90.3 (Cedar-Riverside Community radio station) 612-341-3144

Minneapolis: MTN- 612-331-8575  
St. Paul: Cable Access of St. Paul 651-224-5153

## 6. Legal issues

Without a signed legal release, a researcher or writer cannot legally use the tapes or transcripts. Therefore, it's important to have a release signed before the interview even starts. You don't know what will come out during the course of the interview, and it is better to have consent beforehand, than to try to wrangle it out of the narrator afterward.

If, immediately after the interview, the narrator wishes to delete, or seal a part of the interview, be respectful. Gently try to discourage the narrator from doing so by emphasizing the importance that the information may have to the historical record, but if she is adamant, then have her sign a restricted release form (see next page).

If the narrator feeling very regretful about things that she has said, she may insist that the tape be destroyed or a part of it erased. This puts you in an ethical conundrum. Do you respect her wishes and destroy something that may someday be valuable? Or do you ignore the narrator's wishes and keep the interview unedited? In this situation, try your hardest to convince the narrator to agree to a restricted release, but if she will not agree to it, then erase the disputed part of the tape. The narrator has a right, as every human being does, to restrict what information will be available as a result of their interview. Always respect the narrator. Someday you may be in the same position.

Legal release form

(Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Office)

I \_\_\_\_\_, a participant in an interview recorded on \_\_\_\_\_ hereby give and deliver to \_\_\_\_\_ all the incidents of ownership in that interview, including copyright, from this time forward.

Signed (donor): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed (interviewer): \_\_\_\_\_

Restricted release form

(Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Office)

I \_\_\_\_\_, a participant in an interview recorded on \_\_\_\_\_ hereby give and deliver to \_\_\_\_\_ all the incidents of ownership in that interview, including copyright, from this time forward, with the single exception that access should be given until \_\_\_\_\_ only to those persons having the written permission of \_\_\_\_\_, his or her heir(s), or his or her designee(s) as specified below.

Signed (donor): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed (interviewer): \_\_\_\_\_

Specified heir(s) or designee(s): \_\_\_\_\_

## 7. Sources and suggested further reading

*The following books can be found either at the Minneapolis Central Public Library or at the University of Minnesota Library:*

Baum, Willa K. Oral History for the Local Historical Society. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1974.

-Dated, but still valuable how-to book on recording oral history. More advice on legal and ethical concerns than most oral history texts have.

Brundage, Anthony. Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing. Arlington Heights, IL: Harland Davidson Inc., 1989.

-Good source of information on how to find primary sources of information (transcripts, news articles, manuscripts, diaries). A good primer on how to find the type of information you will need to prepare for interviews with narrators. How to write about history and use primary sources as well as secondary sources. Commentary on historical revisionism and "people's histories"

Dunaway, David K, and Willa K. Baum. Oral History, An Interdisciplinary Anthology. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1996.

-Excellent book on the use and history of oral histories. Moving anecdotes. In-depth information on ethical issues and the historical uses of oral histories.

Frisch, Michael. A Shared Authority. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

-A collection of essays of "people's histories", particularly as regards the labor movement and a socialist construction of history. Chapter 5 has an excellent in-depth guide to the transcribing process, and the finer details of editing for print.

Humphries, Stephen. The Handbook of Oral History. London GB: Inter-action Imprint, 1984.

-Another good how-to book, this time from Great Britain. Several good sections on how to find a broad range of interviewees, family histories, and building community through the recording of oral history.

Ives, Edward D. The Tape-Recorded Interview. A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980.

-Good advice on the selection and interviewing of narrators. Obsolete information on tape recorders. Excellent case studies. A good in-depth manual for more accomplished oral historians.

Kornbluh, Joyce L., M. Brady Mikuskso and Debra Bernhardt. Working Womenroots: An Oral History Primer. Ann Arbor MI: Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Michigan, 1980.

-A "how-to" manual focusing on recording the oral histories of working-class female laborers and union organizers. Insight into the usefulness of recording the histories of an often unacknowledged group of people. Advice on how best to interview women.

Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Office. Oral History Project Guidelines. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1996.

-A short set of guidelines for oral historians to use. Suggestions for effective interviewing as well as legal advice for the novice interviewer.

Minnesota Historical Society Oral History Office. Transcribing, Editing and Processing Guidelines. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1997.

-Guidelines on how to most effectively transcribe the data recorded in the oral history interview. Suggestions on style, and how to edit dialogue for readability while not losing the linguistic flavor of the interview.

Oxford University Press. International Yearbook of Oral History. Oxford GB: Oxford University Press, yearly journal.

-This is not a "how-to" book, but each contains about a dozen transcriptions of oral histories on a variety of topics from around the world. Great reading.

Sitton, Thad, George Mehaffy and O. L. Davis Jr. Oral History, A guide for Teachers and Others. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983.



-An excellent how-to book for use by teachers at secondary schools who wish to create oral history recording projects similar to the "Foxfire" project in Georgia and the "Loblolly" project in Texas. This book is full of wonderful anecdotes and examples and an in-depth explanation of how to start an oral history journal. It is also useful for those desire more in depth information on how oral histories have been used and various methods of going about recording oral histories.

Thompson, Paul. The Voice of the Past. Oral History. Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 1988.

-Much information on the importance and the use of oral histories. Good pointers on how to elicit "real" stories as opposed to stories which try to please the interviewer or to give the socially acceptable view of history. Wonderful case studies from the UK.

University of Hawaii- Manoa. How to Do Oral History, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Manoa: Center for Oral History, Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawaii- Manoa, 1989.

-A very short, but well-written book on how to record the oral history of a specific geographical area. This book is focused mainly on how to record Hawaiian oral histories, but most of the information is applicable to other areas as well.

Vansina, Jan. Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co, 1965.

-Discusses the importance of oral histories , ways that they have been recorded and how they have been used. This is not a how-to book, but it does impress on the reader the value of recording oral histories, and the impact that recording oral history has had on the way history is thought of and taught today.

Wilson, Margaret E. "Oral History Interviews. Some History and Practical suggestions." Studies in Third World Societies. 35 (1988) 253-274.

-An overview of methods used by social scientists to record oral histories. Some "do's and don'ts. Good suggestions on how to treat interview subjects and how best to elicit information.